

MEMBERS ONLY x THE KINGDOM OF SAD MACHINES © 2006

Amongst the  
Flowers

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE 2006

## Introduction

We acknowledge artists as having a command of pictorial representation that gives us poignant insights into the society in which we live. Picasso's daubs, swirls and marks sell for millions of dollars, and connoisseurs queue for hours for a glimpse of their remarkable messages. Yet as we traverse our cities, especially the capital cities served by public transport, our eyes are greeted by a less admired form of visual coding.

The pure elements and principles of design abound with fluent line work, graduated colour and a sense of visual cohesion. The subject, though, is not always held in high esteem.

Graffiti is perhaps the oldest form of visual representation known to humans, our art history reveres the humble bison in the Hall of the Bulls at Lascaux in France. The rock paintings scattered throughout the world also present graffiti according to its pure dictionary definition: "an inscription or drawing made on some public surface" (Webster Dictionary). So why is the current form of graffiti so unwelcome?

To a property owner, the violation of one's private space is an obvious threat, and so in our era of rampant capitalism it is no wonder graffiti has a bad name. In some quarters though, graffiti is seen as one of the purest forms of communication, it is the voice of the people - pure and unadulterated. When we want to know how the people of Pompeii felt about their lives, we do not go to the censored and sanitised versions of history but rather, we read the walls.

How does the transition from seeing it as a violation to venerating it begin? Perhaps it can start by looking beyond the obvious and contextualising the work.

Lee Harnden is a self-confessed graffitiist, and by all accounts a very good one! His work has developed over a 15 year period where he has studied, adapted and developed a fluent style that allows him to produce works of great beauty, with embedded messages. To Lee his work is that of a latter day scribe, his paintings function somewhere between calligraphy and Art Nouveau. He speaks of graffiti as "the most explosive form of representation of the 21st century", and travelling on public transport in Melbourne allows one to fully comprehend the accuracy of this statement.

Graffiti artists collude, conspire and plot their activities; to them they are not malicious but rather essential activities - perhaps in the same league as climbing mountains or speeding down a snow slope.

The thrill is an obvious feature, but it is not the only motivation. Just as in any form of representation there is a need to communicate, not to one's peers but to the larger audience. Lee Harnden's work has been sanctioned in this exhibition by a public utility, the Regional Art Gallery. The work is not a violation of public property but rather a series of paintings that speak of issues relevant to this young artist.

Harnden wants the grunge of graffiti, (the dirty medium) to be seen as something beautiful, he speaks about "spray, being more than a rebel culture". In this suite of works the spray can is just another medium like gouache, oil and acrylic. His technique is also similar to that of an illustrator, one who distils reality into a series of characters that typecast people; a type of visual shorthand easily readable at a glance but poignant enough to prompt greater contemplation.

It is not up to Lee or any other person to say what these paintings mean. Meaning is provisional and only truthful in the eye of the beholder. There are consistent characteristics that feature throughout this exhibition; the sense of beauty and elegance, be it in a 1940s film star portrait or the precision of an AK 47 machine gun. We also gain a sense of wonder and appreciation of power; iconic figures of the animal kingdom exude this as we see the rhino and the eagle stand as metaphors for strength, agility and status.

In retrospect perhaps it is this sense of power and powerlessness, which underpins the genre of the graffiti artist. What drives creative people to risk so much to have their say? Why is it that some of the most intelligent comments and representations of contemporary life are created by those without formal voices? We need to look beyond the wilful damage and see the messages of these subcultures. Amongst the Wolves goes some way towards opening our eyes to these messages.

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